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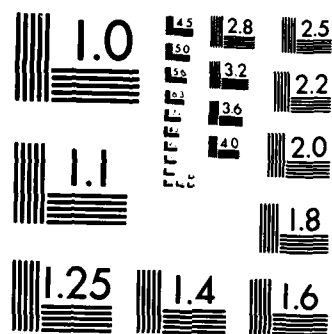
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Peter deLeon

July 1984

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FUTURES STUDIES AND THE POLICY SCIENCES

by

Peter deLeon¹

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The Rand Corporation

July 1984

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LEGITIMACY AND EVALUATION

In 1971, then-Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme asked Alva Myrdal to chair a study commission, or Working Party, whose charter was to:



explore and evaluate methods and procedures for future studies as well as to compile and evaluate current future research of domestic and above all foreign origin. In addition, the Working Party is asked to assess the manpower situation for Swedish activity in future studies and to investigate which measures can serve to improve and enlarge the education of research workers in this field.²

As a result of the Working Party's study and recommendation, the Swedish government established the Secretariat for Futures Studies in early 1973.³ Since then, the Secretariat has conducted and sponsored a number

¹This paper was prepared as part of an evaluation of the Secretariat for Futures Studies commissioned by the Swedish Council for Planning and Coordination of Research. It does not necessarily represent the views of either the Secretariat or the Council. The author is grateful for the comments of his co-panelists, Professors Bjorn Wittrock (University of Stockholm) and Helga Nowotny (University of Vienna).

²As quoted in the publication of the Working Party's final report, Royal Ministry for Foreign Affairs, *To Choose a Future* (Stockholm: Secretariat for Futures Studies, 1973), p. 9.

³The establishment and early history of the Secretariat is chronicled by Bjorn Wittrock, "Sweden's Secretariat: Programmes and Policies," *Futures*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (August 1977), pp. 351-357.

of "futures" studies.⁴ In 1984, the Swedish Council for Planning and Coordination of Research undertook an evaluation of the Secretariat, both in terms of its past work and, more importantly, future directions. This paper details a portion of that evaluation exercise.

Almost since their first application to public policy issues, futures studies have been subjected to charges questioning their legitimacy in terms of both their policy relevance and their methodological standards and rigors. In evaluating the work of the Secretariat for Futures Studies, one must therefore inquire as to the justification and correctness of these concerns, with particular attention as to how they might potentially influence the future work of the Secretariat.⁵ These concerns were central to the Myrdal Working Party when it drafted *To Choose a Future* more than a decade ago.⁶ Its findings were generally positive; indeed, this optimism led directly to the creation of the Secretariat for Futures Studies. We now have the advantage of an additional ten years' experience upon which we can base our observations on these matters.⁷

In this regard, two critical questions warrant immediate attention. The first deals with the legitimacy of futures studies as an analytic exercise, especially if they are to be sponsored by government agencies, i.e., are meant to serve the public weal. In this case, the paramount issue is whether futures studies have an underlying philosophical justification and set of replicative methodological approaches which are relevant and can be rigorously and repeatedly applied to areas of public policy importance. Second, assuming the first question can be answered affirmatively, by what measures can futures studies be evaluated in this

⁴A representative sampling of the Secretariat's activities is contained in Anonymous, *The Future Works!* (Stockholm: Norstedts Tryckeri for the Secretariat for Futures Studies, 1982).

⁵The conclusion is far from preordained. See William Ascher and William H. Overholt, *Strategic Planning and Forecasting* (New York: John Wiley, 1983), and Jonathan I. Gershuny, "What Should Forecasters Do? A Pessimistic View," in Peter R. Baehr and Bjorn Wittrock (eds.), *Policy Analysis and Policy Innovation* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1981).

⁶*To Choose a Future*, p. 9.

⁷A recent review: Robert E. Chute, "International Futures and Policy," *Policy Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3-4 (May 1984), pp. 500-508.

light, for, by their very nature, futures studies and most long-range planning exercises resist the usual time frame found in the standard evaluation criteria. Many of the more noted futures publications are more directed at popular rather than scholarly or policy-oriented audiences and their attention and adherence to methodological standards have seemingly suffered.⁸ As Asher has pointed out, even more serious, short-range forecasting endeavors have proven to be monumentally inaccurate because of fundamental data and model deficiencies.⁹ The twin issues of legitimacy and desiderata are particularly crucial, therefore, in the evaluation of futures studies in general and of the Secretariat for Futures Studies in particular.

It is in the two areas of legitimacy and evaluation criteria where the potentially close relationship or connection between the policy sciences and futures studies could be quite usefully explored, and, if congruent, exploited. Dror, in fact, explicitly asserts that policy-oriented futures research is a subfield within the policy sciences.¹⁰ In the words of Schwarz and her colleagues, "it seems reasonable to expect that the criteria relevant to futures studies would be the same as, or similar to, those often discussed in connection with other research or professional activities which aim at providing information as a basis for public decisions."¹¹ Therefore, before deriving a template with which one might justify and evaluate futures studies and the Secretariat's activities, it would be instructive to review some of the tenets of the policy sciences, especially where they coincide with futures studies, to ascertain the possible symbiotic relationships between the two.¹²

⁸See, e.g., Herman Kahn and Anthony Weiner (eds.), *Towards the Year 2000* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), and, more recently, John Naisbitt, *Megatrends* (New York: Warner Communications, 1983). J. Scott Armstrong, *Long-Range Forecasting: From Crystal Ball to Computer* (New York: John Wiley, 1978), provides an extensive bibliography on the subject.

⁹William Ascher, *Forecasting: An Appraisal for Policy-Makers and Planners* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

¹⁰Yehezkel Dror, *Design for Policy Studies* (New York: American Elsevier, 1971).

¹¹Brita Schwarz, Uno Svedin, and Bjorn Wittrock, *Methods in Futures Studies* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), p. 116.

¹²An illustrative attempt is Peter deLeon, "Things Fall Apart, The Center Cannot Hold: The Crisis in Governing," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (April 1983), pp. 289-304.

POLICY SCIENCES AS A POLICY RESEARCH MODEL

The policy sciences, as originally enunciated in the early 1950s, were characterized as (1) problem-oriented and contextual in nature; (2) multidisciplinary in approach; and (3) rooted in an appreciation of human values and goals. *Inter alia*, they were dedicated to "the improving of the concrete content of the information and the interpretations available to policy-makers..."¹³ with a decided emphasis on public policy decisions. A fourth topic is the theoretical underpinnings of the policy sciences. Finally, one needs to examine two important differences between policy sciences and futures studies. Each of these warrants a brief elaboration. In each case, concrete examples will be extracted from the Swedish futures studies context and the landmark study, *To Choose a Future*.

Problem-Oriented Contextuality

The problem-oriented nature of the policy sciences is manifested by a broad contextual approach, a perspective required because social problems cannot be neatly extracted and isolated from their political, economic, social, and cultural environments. Furthermore, the problems are of a significant societal nature and scale: "The policy approach does not imply that energy is to be dissipated on a miscellany of merely topical issues, but rather that fundamental and often neglected problems which arise in the adjustment of man in society are to be dealt with."¹⁴

These twin aspects of the policy sciences were explicitly recognized and recommended by the Myrdal Working Party. *To Choose a Future* certainly reflected the realization that the long-term problems facing the Swedish society could not be surgically extracted and studied in a laboratory-like, controlled fashion. Moreover, given scarce intellectual assets, futures studies resources should not be squandered on insignificant questions of faddish or temporary topicality. These concerns were manifested by the Working Party's insistence that the

¹³Harold D. Lasswell, "The Policy Orientation," in Daniel Lerner and Harold D. Lasswell (eds.), *The Policy Sciences* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1951), p. 3.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 14.

complete panoply of the social and physical sciences be accessible for futures studies and that they address truly important and often long-range problems confronting the Swedish nation (e.g., energy and the society, Sweden's place in the international community, working life in the future, and the availability of natural resources and raw materials).

Multidisciplinary Approach

It follows, then, that a multidisciplinary approach would be necessary for the policy sciences were they to achieve their objectives. Lasswell, drawing largely from his wartime experiences, particularly stressed the inclusion of the behavioral sciences. Implicit in this was his cognizance of the powerful social and institutional factors which influenced (and often determined) public policy questions and decisions, but also an early awareness of the shortcomings of the more quantitative approaches, the dangers of strictly numerical analyses and extrapolations, and the inherent fallacies of a reliance on technique when dealing with the future and its almost certain uncertainties.¹⁵ In the words of philosopher Barrett, "The insistence upon exactitude has to bow to the requirements of adequacy."¹⁶ Lasswell himself urged the application of the social sciences to policy questions but clearly the phrase policy sciences was carefully chosen to encompass all the disciplines pertinent to a particular subject or issue-area as a means of coping with the complexity of a problem.

In practical terms, these conditions of complexity and uncertainty require a true multidisciplinary approach, with each discipline's contributions epistemologically integrated into the study of the whole. Once again, this matches closely the futures study's approach in general and the specific recommendations of the Myrdal Working Party in particular, to "synthesize the hard and soft techniques, the better to understand and to improve complex decisions and policy

¹⁵Lasswell, "The Policy Orientation," and, for an elaboration, Harold D. Lasswell, *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences*, (New York: American Elsevier, 1971), Chap. 4, "Diversity: Synthesis of Methods."

¹⁶William Barrett, *The Illusions of Technique* (New York: Doubleday, 1979). Also see Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1964).

formulation."¹⁷ And elsewhere: "Properly handled, the mooring of research in a future perspective can catalyze an interdisciplinary approach," and be a "synthesizing" as opposed to the traditional "analytical" science.¹⁸

Values and Goals

Finally, the policy sciences have, from their very inception, been explicitly normative in their content and concern with human values. In Lasswell's words, "The policy science approach...calls forth a very considerable clarification of the value goals involved in policy,"¹⁹ towards what he called the "policy sciences of democracy." Lasswell and Kaplan define the policy sciences as providing "intelligence pertinent to the integration of values realized by and embodied in interpersonal relations," which "prizes not the glory of a depersonalized state or the efficiency of a social mechanism, but human dignity and the realization of human capacities."²⁰ This emphasis on values--especially those relating to the protection and advancement of human dignity--have remained a touchstone of the policy sciences approach in both general concept²¹ and applied research.²²

The policy sciences' commitment to the open and analytic inclusion of goals and values is shared by a similar perspective regarding their inclusion in futures studies, for it is clear that the choice of one's future is intimately connected--indeed, a function of--one's values as

¹⁷*To Choose a Future*, p. 127; see Chap. 7, "Theory and Methodology."

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁹Lasswell, "The Policy Orientation," p. 9. Again, for elaboration, see Lasswell, *A Pre-View of Policy Science*, Chap. 3, "The Intellectual Tasks."

²⁰Harold D. Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan, *Power and Society* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. xii and xxiv, respectively.

²¹For example, Garry D. Brewer, "The Policy Sciences Emerge: To Nurture and Structure a Discipline," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (September 1974), pp. 239-244; and Peter deLeon, "Policy Sciences: The Discipline and the Profession," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (February 1981), pp. 1-7.

²²For instance, what Duncan MacRae, "Valuative Problems of Public Policy Analysis," in John P. Crene (ed.), *Research in Public Policy Analysis and Management* (Greenwich, CN: JAI Press, 1981), Vol. I, pp. 175-194, calls "applied systematic ethics" (at p. 175).

reflected in societal values, goals, and goal definition. Although the methodologies by which values are incorporated have been as ambiguous and ambivalent as the values themselves,²³ it is safe to say that they have been explicitly treated in a number of futures studies, usually by means of differing scenarios.²⁴ It is therefore not surprising that the Myrdal Working Party heavily stressed the value content of futures studies in terms which mirror Lasswell and Kaplan:

The democratic state has a special responsibility for bringing out source data on behalf of the long-range public interest and to render service to the weaker groups and individuals, as well as to ensure that free, independent groups also have access to relevant information.²⁵

Explicit warnings were issued not to tolerate studies "based on scales of value that are not democratically acceptable. We must avoid any 'colonizing of the future' by powerful interest groups, national or international."²⁶ This tradition continues to manifest itself in the Swedish context.²⁷ In the questions of values and their resulting goals, it appears that the policy sciences and futures studies are of a similar bent, although there is some question as to the relative importance of professional, political, and paradigmatic values.²⁸

²³Abraham Kaplan, *American Ethics and Public Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), writes of "situational ethics."

²⁴Bjorn Wittrock, "Long-Range Forecasting and Policy-Making--Options and Limits in Choosing a Future," in Tom Whiston (ed.), *The Uses and Abuses of Forecasting* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), pp. 270-271.

²⁵*To Choose a Future*, p. 15; see Sec. 2.6, "Goals, Decisions, and Values."

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 7.

²⁷E.g., Marten Lagergren et al., *Time to Care* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon for the Secretariat for Futures Studies, 1984), examine the future of the Swedish welfare system.

²⁸Schwarz et al., *Methods in Futures Studies*, pp. 154-156.

Theoretical Bases

A final coincidence between the policy sciences and futures studies is germane. The latter is often criticized for its lack or neglect of an underlying theory. The very sympathetic Helmer cautions: "A formal theoretical structure does not exist here."²⁹ The effects of this absence for computer simulation models are tellingly documented by Ascher.³⁰ Over longer, more extended time frames (such as those which characterize futures studies), the errors and uncertainties, the critics argue, can only compound themselves and render the forecasts specious, rather academic exercises at best. Implicit in this charge is a standard which compares futures studies to the physical, more empirical sciences, i.e., the natural sciences paradigm.

The policy sciences have likewise been affixed to such comparisons and standards,³¹ but have persuasively argued that such criteria are not applicable (this is not to say they are irrelevant) in judging the end product. Most simply, the problems addressed by the policy sciences cannot be confidently or completely examined if one is restricted to quantitative (and their underlying empirical) paradigms. As Brunner has commented, "The limitations of quantitative and rigorous methods have been clarified by the results of their application in the social sciences. Adjustments to these limitations include the adoption of more modest but realizable aspirations and the synthesis of diverse methods--quantitative as well as qualitative, rigorous as well as exploratory."³² Psychologist Campbell seconds Brunner's thesis: "there is renewed emphasis on the methods of the humanities and increased doubts as to the appropriateness of applying the natural sciences model to social science

²⁹Olaf Helmer, *Looking Forward: A Guide to Futures Research* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1983), p. 103.

³⁰Ascher, *Forecasting*; also see Ascher and Overholt, *Strategic Planning and Forecasting*.

³¹A recent example: Janet A. Schneider et al., "Policy Research and Analysis: An Empirical Profile, 1975-1980," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (December 1982), pp. 99-114.

³²Ronald D. Brunner, "The Policy Sciences as Science," *Policy Sciences*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (December 1982), p. 116.

problems."³³ Indeed, Hirschman asks if adherence to a model might not serve as a blinder rather than guide, especially when dealing with the major uncertainties which pervade public policy research issues.³⁴

If this is true, then the more appropriate stance for judging an underlying theory for the policy sciences is more modest, that is, a gradual accretion of workable typologies³⁵ in a Kuhnesian manner towards mid-range theories.³⁶ The demand that the policy sciences develop and abide by hard and fast "laws" or theoretical breakthroughs is not only unjust, it is counterproductive (in terms of opportunity costs) and perhaps even irrelevant. This is not to claim that the proponents and components of the policy sciences could not benefit from salient disciplinary theories or from the application of rigorous, empirical methodologies. Rather, the evidence is convincing that the requirement for holistic, overriding, or ubiquitous theory in the policy sciences is unwarranted.

By much the same logic, futures studies should not be held at fault solely for their lack of a guiding theoretical base or their inability to follow the rules of evidence employed by the so-called "exact sciences."³⁷ These latitudes are permissible because the objective of futures studies should not be to predict the future with apodictic foresight; its more modest and accessible objectives should be to identify and examine alternative futures in terms of transitions, preferences, and consequences.³⁸ It is the latter set of goals to which

³³Donald T. Campbell, "Qualitative Knowledge in Action Research;" paper presented to the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, New Orleans, 1974; cited in *ibid.*, p. 116.

³⁴Albert O. Hirschman, "The Search for Paradigms as a Hindrance to Understanding," *World Politics*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (April 1976), pp. 329-343. Also see Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry*, in which he cautions against the premature formulation of or allegiance to models.

³⁵See, for instance, Lasswell and Kaplan, *Power and Society*, and Theodore J. Lowi, "Four Systems of Policy, Politics, and Choice," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (July/August 1972), pp. 298-310.

³⁶Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1970 edit.).

³⁷Helmer, *Looking Forward*, Sec. 6, "On the Epistemology of the Inexact Sciences."

³⁸Schwarz et al., *Methods in Futures Studies*, p. 111; also pp. 31-34.

the Myrdal Working Party implicitly subscribed, as demonstrated both by its refusal to bind futures studies to a single theoretical model and by its selected illustrations of futures studies topics--choices whose range and scope defied the definition and imposition of overarching theories.³⁹

Time Frames and Policy Applications

All of these similarities appear to be relevant if the policy sciences are pertinent in assessing futures studies. Two important distinctions, however, need to be made between the two fields of inquiry, those of time horizons and policy applications. Many, perhaps even most, policy studies are conducted with direct policymaking relevance in mind for the near time frame; policy forecasts are no exception.⁴⁰ Futures studies, on the other hand, typically have time horizons in the far distance, in some cases, decades removed, and public policy might not be a pressing matter. Hence, the latter are usually not designed to serve the needs of the contemporary policymaking community; e.g., implementation analysis is not a concern of the futures study researcher.

Still, the distinction should not be viewed as absolute or allowed to vitiate the earlier limned analogies. Many long-range studies could easily have current policy influence; in fact, many have generated and fueled heated public debate.⁴¹ Moreover, as Schwarz and her coauthors write, "it is not the time horizon as such which is the distinguishing feature of futures studies; it is rather the emphasis on the way

³⁹To Choose a Future, Sec. 5, "Long-term Motivated Basic Research."

⁴⁰Even if the accuracy of such forecasts is dubious; see Charles Wolf, Jr., "Pin a Tail on the Forecasts," *New York Times*, June 30, 1984, p. 17.

⁴¹Four examples: D.H. Meadows et al., *The Limits of Growth* (Washington, D.C.: Universal for Potomac Associates, 1972); Council on Environmental Quality and Department of State, *The Global Report 2000 to the President: Entering the Twenty-First Century* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980); Mons Lonnroth et al., *Solar versus Nuclear: Choosing Energy Futures* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon, 1980); and *idem.*, *Energy in Transition: A Report on Energy Policy and Future Options* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). The latter two volumes were publications based upon a study sponsored by the Secretariat for Futures Studies.

conditions and situations change over time."⁴² In other words, the analysis of trends and conditions, which Lasswell defines as a characteristic of the policy process,⁴³ is just as much a component of the futures studies' approach as it is the policy sciences'.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we have shown that there are distinct areas of important coincidence between the policy sciences and futures studies, overlaps which suggest a close relationship between the two. Policy analysis has almost been universally accepted by public policymakers as a profession and discipline which can improve the quality of the policy process.⁴⁴ One does not have to agree completely with Dror that policy-oriented futures research is a subfield of the policy sciences⁴⁵ to appreciate that many of the justifications which have established the legitimacy of the latter are salient to the former. Similarly, many of the evaluative criteria which have proven useful in assessing policy research are applicable to futures studies as well. Although essential differences can be distinguished between the two approaches, they do not invalidate the comparisons nor deny the possible growth of futures studies as a result of the relationship.

The legitimization of futures studies as a public policy exercise (as opposed to an intellectual indulgence) should not then be at issue. Moreover, the demonstrated commonalities between futures studies and the policy sciences encourages one to apply the multidisciplinary, contextual approaches and evaluations which characterize the latter to the problem-oriented topics of the former, albeit with discernment because of the noted differences in time horizons. Drawing upon the intellectual and analytical capital amassed by the policy sciences, one can assert with some confidence that futures studies can represent a

⁴²Schwarz et al., *Methods in Futures Studies*, p. 4.

⁴³Lasswell, *A Pre-View of Policy Sciences*, Chap. 3.

⁴⁴Although not without reservation; see Martin Rein and Sheldon H. White, "Can Policy Research Help Policy?" *The Public Interest*, No. 49 (Fall 1977), pp. 119-136; also deLeon, "Policy Sciences: The Discipline and the Profession."

⁴⁵Dror, *Design for Policy Studies*.

legitimate and epistemologically sound exercise in public policymaking. This is not to imply that important conceptual, methodological, and applications hurdles do not challenge the future of futures studies.⁴⁶ An overemphasis on global modeling--perhaps in response to criticisms of the "softness" of futures studies--is one obvious example.⁴⁷ Policy application questions cannot be indulgently assumed away if futures studies are to remain intellectually vital as well as maintain their relevance.⁴⁸ The level of analysis and time frame criteria should be matters for on-going consideration. In these and other matters, Sweden's Secretariat for Futures Studies is a futures studies laboratory of acute interest to policy scientists and futurologists alike and, as in the past, warrants our continued attention.

⁴⁶Cf. Schwartz et al., *Methods in Futures Studies*, with Gershuny, "What Should Forecasters Do?"

⁴⁷Donna Meadows et al., *Groping in the Dark: The First Decade of Global Modeling* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley, 1982).

⁴⁸U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, *Global Models, World Futures, and Public Policy: A Critique* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982).

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